TO LOVE AND SERVE
May 17, 2009

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Psalm 68:4–10
John 15:1, 4, 5, 12–16

"You did not choose me, but I chose you . . .
appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last."
John 15:16 (NRSV)

In a vision God called upon St. Francis of Assisi to rebuild the church. Unsure of what God meant, Francis chose a ruined one near where he lived. He recruited all kinds of people to help. Some just came to watch, and before they knew it they were mixing cement. Others could not lift a single brick without help, but that worked out, since it led them to meet more people than they would have if they had been stronger. To most of them building the church became more important than finishing it—when it was done at last, Francis's church did not stand as a shelter from the world; it stood as a reminder that the whole world was God's house.

Barbara Brown Taylor
An Altar in the World

It is a cardinal rule of preaching that one's family and one's vacations should not show up in one's sermons.

I violate the first part of the rule regularly, for the simple reason that little children are great theologians and ask profound theological questions, and therefore grandchildren are an inexhaustible source of sermon material. So when you have as many as I do—well, why not?

This morning I will violate the second part of the rule, the part about no vacations in the sermon. I have been away—in Italy—for several weeks. What I do in Italy essentially is read and visit churches, with a little pasta and shopping and vina rossa in between.

I visit churches, look at church buildings, sit in the back pews of churches, sometimes put a Euro in the box and light a candle and say a prayer for someone, a child or grandchild who needs a prayer that day or a member of my congregation who is sick or lonely or facing surgery, or sometimes just a prayer of gratitude, a thank-you for that particular church sitting there as it

has for maybe five, six, seven centuries at the center of a small hill town in Umbria. Every city and every small town has one at the center; larger cities have a cathedral, the *duomo.* Some of them are huge, architectural and engineering miracles, such as Brunelleschi's dome over the incomparable Duomo in Florence. They sit at the center, the heart of the community. I sit in a church almost every day and think about the architecture, try to imagine what it must have looked like 400 years ago when the walls were covered with frescoes, a few fragments of which are still visible, colorful expressions of Bible stories, popes, and saints. I like to think of all the people who sat in this space over centuries. And I like to think about how it was built. There is one thing they all share mostly: it took a long time, sometimes centuries, to build them. One generation started the project, broke ground, and dug foundations deep in the earth. That was it. And then another generation took up the task, finished the foundation and began on the walls, a few feet out of the ground. Then the next generation took over and built the frames and lintels for windows and doors. It took centuries to build those churches. Some are not complete yet, and all of them are now being rebuilt, restored, repaired. And the thought always occurs to me that this task of building a church is really never completed.

The great twentieth-century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope."

"But the church is the people, isn't it? Not the building. Church buildings are what's wrong in the first place. All those lavish buildings and the art, glass, frescoes, statues are a distraction from what Jesus taught and a monumental waste of time and money." Someone is always talking like that. Judas Iscariot was the first one, interestingly suggesting the costly ointment a woman once poured over Jesus' feet should have instead been sold and the money given to the poor. Someone is always counting the cost of building churches and calculating how many hungry people would be fed if the money had been used for that instead.

There is merit to that critique, of course. Maintaining the building can be a distraction from the purpose or mission of the church; a church can develop an "Edifice Complex" so profound that a subtle transference occurs and people begin to think that the building *is* the church.

And yet part of an honest critical analysis of the church needs to include the positive and good things that happen in the world: the hungry fed because the church was there, the homeless sheltered. And no one has ever been able to assign economic value to the way a church expresses the heart and soul of the community, its best and noblest instincts. John Updike said somewhere that if you want to get a sense of a community, visit its churches along with its museums, libraries, and schools.

I spend most of my waking hours in a church building and have for more than forty years. And when I am not working, I like to look at, admire, sit in, and think about church buildings. If I am not an expert on the topic, I certainly qualify for some credibility, just in terms of time and experience. And I have two conclusions. First, Jesus called his followers not away from institutions and buildings, but into them with a purpose—called his followers to the synagogue and to the temple, where they spent a lot of time. Eugene Peterson, a very insightful thinker, says that it's not possible to enlist Jesus in the effort to bash and denigrate institutions. He took institutions of his day—synagogue and temple—very seriously. And so Jesus calls followers into churches today to be faithful there, to be in the world as only a church building is, to go out from there and live for him and then return there for comfort and encouragement and to say "thank you" along with all the other followers. It is not entirely true that the church is the people, not the building. The truth, it seems to me, is that the church is the people and the building, however grand and glorious or modest, in which they gather to pray and say "thank you," from which they go every week into the world to live for Jesus and to which they will return next Sunday. (See Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way,* p. 231)

That's the first. And the second conclusion is that building a church is a task that is never completed but handed down from one generation to the next.

So now it is our turn to take up the work, and what a cast of characters we are privileged to follow. We are remembering one of them particularly today: John Timothy Stone, whose ministry at Fourth Church began 100 years ago and who led the congregation to begin the project. The leadership of this congregation in the first decade of the twentieth century was strong and faithful and visionary. They purchased property on old Pine Street, a dirt road with no bridge over the river yet, Lake Michigan 200 feet away. Surrounding the property was a tannery, nondescript rooming houses, and on the corner of Chestnut, M. Donoghue's Sample Shop, a corner tavern.

They had a dream, a vision, and led by John Timothy Stone they hired the best architects in the land, Ralph Adams Cram and Howard Van Doren Shaw, to plan the new church. They broke ground in 1912, and the new building opened its doors for the first time in 1914, 95 years ago this month, the same month that Wrigley Field opened for business. Stone's son George and George's wife, Eileen, are here with us today.

John Timothy Stone was succeeded by a young assistant pastor who had served as a chaplain in World War I, Harrison Ray Anderson. Under the leadership of Anderson and another generation of faithful women and men, the church grew and reached out to young urban adults who had moved to the city to seek their fortune and lived nearby. Young adult groups met

weekly and brought together 600 to 700 people, many of whom joined the church. Anderson was also a leader in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Moderator of the General Assembly, as was Stone. Both of his children—Lad (Harrison Ray Anderson Jr.) and his wife, Lois, and Doris Anderson Drake—sent regrets and greetings for today.

Elam Davies, from Wales by way of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, succeeded Anderson, and with a new generation of wise and faithful members and leaders led through the tumultuous sixties when many churches like this one locked the doors to protect against violence, upheaval, and racial diversity or sold out and moved to the suburbs. Davies and his leaders did the unexpected and unlikely: opened the doors, invited neighbors in, created programs—Tutoring, the Counseling Center, the Social Service Center—to engage, not escape from, the city and the needs of its people.

Now another generation, and the task of building the church continues. The phase of the ongoing project that is ours is to expand our facilities to meet the needs of a congregation that is more than twice the size it used to be and a development no one in the past foresaw or prepared for: hundreds of young families with hundreds and hundreds of babies, children, and young people in a facility that was not built with them in mind. And so we take up the task and pick up the tools to continue the task of building the church.

I was intrigued to learn that when the pulpit committee first invited John Timothy Stone to come to Chicago, he turned them down. He told the committee that they needed to put themselves to a “larger work and a new and better-equipped edifice.”

So the committee met in a downtown bank office on December 23, 1908, called a meeting of the congregation for December 27, and proposed a vision for “a larger work and a new building.”

Before the meeting was over, they had $66,000. Cyrus H. McCormick Jr. rose and said his family would give $1 for every $2 other members pledged. McCormick himself traveled to Baltimore with $100,000 in pledges, and this time Stone accepted. This building was the result.

Today the congregation of Fourth Presbyterian Church is much larger than the congregation in 1909 that had the vision and started the work.

Our first and ongoing challenge is to continue to build internal strength, to challenge all our members to deepen their faith in Jesus Christ, to be more intentional in living for him, and to share the vision, become involved in and support his church financially. To that end, several generous members of the church have contributed $360,000 in addition to their regular annual giving for the express purpose of challenging fellow members to give

generously and specifically to the members who do not pledge or give at all to begin to participate in the mission.

And we face the crucial challenge to build a facility to expand the almost 100-year-old legacy to meet the needs and serve the mission of a vital, growing twenty-first-century congregation.

We are calling our chapter of the long story of the church, our part of the continuing process of building, “Project Second Century: Called to Love and Serve.”

One of the most remarkable things Jesus ever said is “You did not choose me, but I chose you, appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last.” It comes as he is talking to his disciples at the table of the Last Supper. He is summing up, issuing final instructions, because this, he seems to know, will be his last night on earth. And right in the middle: “You did not choose me; I chose you.”

It is a haunting, powerful idea that in ways we have difficulty talking about or even understanding: we are chosen, called, appointed by God. It’s hard to see it or know it at the time, but looking back there is a guiding purpose, a gracious intent, at work in our lives. It is not because of anything in us or about us. All we can say about it is to confess that somehow God has been part of the story of our lives. All we can say about it without sounding foolish or arrogantly pious is, at the end of the day, “thank you.”

It’s not that God has rearranged all the details of our lives. It’s more of a consistent nudging, pointing, showing a possibility here, an opening there, encouraging, strengthening, nagging, persistently until we answer; a gracious, loving, attentiveness; a chosenness.

When I ponder those old Italian churches, when I ponder the remarkable story of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, I believe there is something of God’s will and intent going on here down through the years—that we, and those who preceded us, are chosen by Jesus Christ to be his church in this place, in this time, called to love and serve. And I believe that of all things you and I are called to build, to give our love and our lives to—family, a business, a portfolio, an inheritance for our children, a university—none is more important, more pregnant with hope, pregnant with the love of God, than this one: to build a church.

On Good Friday, I made some telephone calls to a few people who I knew were not able to be here on Easter morning, to wish them a blessed Easter. One of them was Grace Davies, widow of Elam Davies, who is ninety-three, not well, and living in a retirement community in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, beside the church Elam served before coming to Chicago.

Grace is British, with the refinement and graciousness of an age gone by, but also with a marvelous sense of humor and sparkling wit.

I asked how she was, and she described her condition with a degree of detail and offhandedness that made us both laugh. “They tell me it is very rare,” she said. “I’ve never done anything conventional, so why now?”

“Is it treatable?” I asked. “Oh, I don’t think that would be advisable,” she said. I told her that she was very brave and that I would be praying for her and so would her friends in her church. “You know, it *is* my church,” she said. And then lowering her voice she confided, “I have to be careful when I say that around her. When I say ‘my church,’ my friends think it is the one next door. But my church is Fourth Church—in my heart, forever.”

The church is not perfect—not this one, not any church.

But for 2,000 years it has been the institutional expression of the basic Christian belief that the love of God came among us in Jesus Christ, that God’s love continues to come into the world not in any abstract, purely spiritual sense, but through an institution—the church.

And that God calls men and women to live in love, through the church, and calls the church itself to love and serve the world as Jesus did.

And so whatever your status this morning—a member of this church, a member of another church in another community, not a member but an occasional or first-time visitor—I ask you this morning to consider seriously the idea that the church is God’s way of bringing a bit of the kingdom of God into the world.

And furthermore that God calls you to be part of it—to love and serve.

Amen.